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SUBJECT: OSCE COMMITTED TO MAKING KOSOVO ELECTIONS HAPPEN
ON SCHEDULE BUT WORRIES REMAIN

REF: PRISTINA 000668

Summary:

11. (SBU) The OSCE Mission in Kosovo (OMiK) says it is fully committed to doing its part to ensure that the November 17 local and central elections come off successfully and on schedule. Nonetheless, key OMiK officials are worried that they may not be able to overcome a number of logistical hurdles, including the need to outsource ballot printing, in the two months remaining before the elections. OMiK has given a lukewarm response to the IOM's offer to help organize and extend the vote to the Kosovan diaspora. End Summary.

OMiK's Big Worry: Printing and Distributing Ballots

12. (SBU) Well-placed sources within OMiK paint a picture of an OSCE field mission pulling on all oars to put in place all the conditions necessary for free, fair, and successful municipal and central elections on November 17. While key OMiK staff members say the mission is fully committed to fulfilling their responsibilities, they confess to being frustrated and worried that the Mission may not be able to overcome certain logistical and technical hurdles outside of its control in the two months remaining before the elections.

13. (SBU) OMiK's principle worry appears to be getting the ballots printed and distributed throughout Kosovo on time. While the deadline for submitting candidate lists expired on September 12, finalizing the ballots, two OMiK sources said, may not be possible for nearly another month given the complexity of sorting through, vetting, and ordering the lists for three separate polls (parliamentary, municipal, and mayoral) and the requirement to let the appeals process run its legally-mandated course. Once the ballots have been finalized, the mission will have to send them outside of Kosovo to be printed since there is no local printing facility capable of producing the ballots with the necessary security features to prevent fraud. Estimates for printing the ballots have ranged from 21 to 45 days, and none of the printing facilities that OMiK has approached will give the Mission a guarantee that they can deliver the ballots on time. Once the ballots are delivered to Kosovo, OMiK claims at least three days will be necessary to distribute the ballots in a controlled manner to all the polling stations throughout Kosovo.

14. (SBU) Peter Von Bethlenfalvy, the IOM's mission director in Vienna, met with USOSCE DCM Kyle Scott on September 11 to ask U.S. government support in enlisting the IOM to organize voting outside of Kosovo for the Kosovan diaspora. Von Bethlenfalvy estimated that there were between 300-400 thousand Kosovans of voting age currently living outside of Kosovo, with sizable expatriate populations in Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Austria, Sweden, Slovenia, and the U.S., and argued that it would be unfair for the international community to exclude such a significant voting block from participating in the elections.

15. (SBU) He expressed confidence that the IOM has the expertise, ability, and time to organize polling for the expatriate population, as it has done in past elections in Kosovo, but so far lacked an invitation from the OSCE to do so. Specifically, Von Bethlenfalvy claimed the IOM could register expatriate voters, check and confirm their identity, establish voting locations, conduct voter outreach and education, and ensure the security and integrity of the vote abroad. Doing so, he admitted, would not come cheap -- he estimated that the IOM would need around 2 million euros to organize elections outside of the country. He added that he had passed IOM's proposal informally with OSCE Secretary General Marc Perrin de Brichambaut and ODIHR Director Christian Strohal, but since neither had given him the expectation that an invitation would be forthcoming, he had decided to bring the issue to our attention directly.

. . . but OMiK's Lukewarm to IOM's Offer

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16. (SBU) USOSCE has passed IOM's proposal to our contacts in both the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna and in the field mission but we sense that both may regard the initiative at this late date as difficult to actualize and not worth the effort. One particularly well-placed source within OMiK questioned whether organizing voting for the diaspora was really worth the time, effort, and money given the relatively meager participation of the expatriate community in previous elections.

17. (U) Background: To date, OMiK has organized and supervised four elections in Kosovo: at the municipal level in 2000 and 2002, and at the central level in 2001 and 2004. While elections are a reserved responsibility of UNMiK delegated to the OSCE, the Mission has progressively transferred responsibility for the administration of the election to local election institutions. OMiK Head of Mission Werner Wnendt, however, continues to chair the Central Elections Commission, and remains responsible for monitoring the preparation and conduct of the elections and for intervening as necessary to prevent or remedy any potential misconduct or deviation from electoral rules. For this reason, as explained in ref, ODIHR will not be leading the election monitoring mission.

Comment:

18. (SBU) It is no secret that both OSCE Secretary General de Brichambaut and OMiK Head of Mission Werner Wnendt regret that the field mission was only given two-and-a-half months to help organize these elections rather than the full four months they said were necessary to prepare adequately. USOSCE defers to our colleagues in USOP who are closer to the problem, but from our vantage point in Vienna we believe that both the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna and the field mission in Kosovo, despite their belly-aching, do not want to let the international community down and are expending maximum effort to prepare Kosovo to hold elections on November 17 as

scheduled. We also defer to Washington and Pristina on whether an IOM role in the elections at this late day is worth pursuing, and are prepared to push the OSCE from Vienna if the answer is yes.

SCOTT